

# Building a Soft-landing Network

Lean Landing – What we learned



# Lean Landing for Micro SMEs

In the North Sea Region (NSR), few SMEs engage in internationalisation activities and even fewer SMEs succeed with this activity in the longer term. Lean Landing is designed to help micro SMEs, succeed in their internationalisation efforts by offering them a fast track to new markets in the North Sea Region.

Based on the 'Lean start-up' methodology, Lean Landing encourages micro SMEs to reduce the time spent analysing and planning their route to market, by facilitating the testing of their product or services with potential business partners and/or customers in the new market. Based on the direct market feedback, the SME can adapt their product or service before returning to the target market with the purpose of settling in that market.

## The phases of Lean Landing

### DEVELOPMENT PHASE

The structure and methodology of a last-ing soft-landing network was developed by the 16 project partners through a series of concept development sessions in each country. The project partners consist of business incubators, knowledge institutions and public business development organisations from six countries in the North Sea Region, namely Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK.

### IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

More than 150 SMEs have been introduced to new markets and met potential customers and/or business partners in the North Sea Region. The project partners provided hands-on knowledge, local insights into their home market and facilitated B2B match-making, in order to test how well the micro SMEs product or service fitted into the market.

#### PROJECT NAME

Lean Landing for Micro SMEs

#### LEAD PARTNER

Erhvervshus Sjælland  
(Denmark)

#### NUMBER OF PROJECT PARTNERS

16

#### PROJECT PERIOD

1 November 2015 to  
30 June 2019

#### BUDGET

EUR 3,6 million

#### FUNDED BY

Interreg North Sea Region

Learn more about *Lean Landing* on  
[www.northsearegion.eu/lean-landing](http://www.northsearegion.eu/lean-landing)

# A Blue Print for Building a Soft-landing Network

Lean Landing represents a new approach for micro SMEs with regards to internationalisation. The concept is innovative in rejecting the methodical analysis and planning approach to internationalisation in favour of an action-oriented approach, and it is far-reaching in involving 16 business incubators, knowledge institutions such as universities and business development organizations in six countries in the North Sea Region.

Over the past three years, the Lean Landing concept has been tested by more than 250 micro SMEs who have participated in the project. More than 150 of these 250 micro SMEs have obtained new market knowledge, validation of their product or services and meetings with new potential business partners and/or customers in a North Sea Region market.

Whereas some parts of the Lean Landing concept were immediately successful, other parts have been adjusted or changed during the project period. As such, the content of the project activities has been revised and new approaches to match the micro SMEs with potential business partners and customers have been introduced to meet the needs of the participating companies.

Additionally, Lean Landing has developed and implemented a successful, lasting soft-landing network between the 16 participating partners within six countries in the North Sea Region. This has been the result of a co-creation

process between the project partners involved, and it continues to be so after the end of the Lean Landing project. It is the ambition of Lean Landing that even more organisations from other European countries will join the network, thereby providing help to their local SMEs with even more business opportunities for finding potential business partners, customers and market insight in other markets in Europe .

Lean Landing has been a journey and a learning process. In this soft-landing blueprint, we share advice for others who are going to develop or implement a similar soft-landing programme. We are hopeful that you will find this blueprint informative as well as inspirational.

*Enjoy reading!*  
*Lean Landing*

# The soft-landing programme

The Lean Landing project was designed to get micro SMEs and start-ups, quickly into new markets in the NSR.

The Lean Landing project was designed to get micro SMEs and start-ups, quickly into new markets in the North Sea Region. The four step program favoured a hands-on approach where meetings with potential business partners and/or customers were set up, so the SMEs could get fast feedback and perform real-time tests of the potential of their products and services in the foreign market.

The program was free to join, but required the SMEs to go through a screening interview that assessed the SME's potential and motivation before entering the project. Furthermore the program refunded 50% of the SMEs' travel costs in step 2 and 25 % of their travel costs in steps 3 and 4.

## STEP 1

### Defining your needs

The SMEs meet their local Lean Landing project partner. They define their target market and the type of business partners and/or customers they are looking for.

## STEP 2

### Getting out there

The SMEs meet potential business partners and/or customers in the foreign market, obtaining valuable market knowledge and validation of their products or services which can be used to improve their business.

## STEP 3

### Staying out there

The SMEs who have entered into partnerships with business partners and/or agreements with customers in the foreign market participate in follow-up meetings. The SMEs learn more about doing business in the target market.

## STEP 4

### Settling in the market

The SMEs return to the target market to finalise business agreements and an entrepreneurial internationalisation strategy. Furthermore the company 'settles' in the market with an office or by hiring a local agent etc.

# Lessons learned from Lean Landing



Funding



The Human Factor in Building a Soft-landing Network



An Online Platform



Pre-qualification of the Micro SME's



A Lead Partner





In order to initiate a 'cross border' network and develop a best practice soft-landing programme like Lean Landing, funding is needed. For the participating partners and the micro SME's, the funding has been of crucial importance for the development and the implementation of the project goals.

## THE INVOLVED PARTNERS

The development of the Lean Landing soft-landing programme in year one of the project required each partner's presence and input. Travelling between countries, having concept development workshops and meeting each other face-to-face were some of the most important steps in the beginning of such a soft-landing programme.

## ENGAGING MICRO SME'S

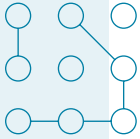
The 50% reimbursement of travel expenses for participating micro SMEs has been a major contributing factor into whether or not a company could go abroad. This, in many cases, has been decisive in whether a company could test their product or service and

participate in the meetings arranged by the foreign partner in a new market.

## FUNDING IS NEEDED

Lean Landing is no different from other EU funded projects where funding is given to develop a project idea and see it through to successful implementation. To build a cross border network and develop a soft-landing programme, funding is often of vital importance for such an initiative.

# The Human Factor in Building a Soft-landing Network



The close and trust-worthy relationship built amongst the partners has been one of the most important elements in Lean Landing. Without the trust and interpersonal relationship between the partners there would be no project.

Prior to Lean Landing, the project partners did not know each other and had no history of working together. During the development workshops in each other's countries the project partners co-created the soft-landing programme and developed a common methodology for introducing SMEs to new markets in the North Sea Region.

Recognising and investing in the importance of this interpersonal relationship early on, when doing cross border projects with partners, is something that is recommended and highlighted as a point to be taking seriously.

Living in a digital world, online communication is of course preferable in daily communication, but meeting each other in person, and traveling to each other's incubators, was a necessity for

the success of Lean Landing and the interpersonal relationship among the partners, ultimately cementing the success of Lean Landing.

Lean Landing therefore emphasises the great importance of face-to-face interaction between project partners especially in transnational projects. It is recommended that future soft-landing networks earmark funding for mutual partner visits in the budget, especially in the development phase, but also in the implementation phase.

*We feel privileged to be working as part of the project, which is challenging traditional methods of exporting to make it quick and lean. This project has enabled us to form really strong relationships with our North Sea partners and to grow our reputation overseas for our collaborative working with SMEs*

Janet Mulcrone  
Leeds Beckett University  
Lean Landing Project Partner

## Sharing knowledge across borders – Online platform



Being able to easily share knowledge about participating SMEs amongst the project partners has been essential to Lean Landing.

The project has used the online platform 'Podio' for this purpose. On behalf of each SME, the local partner uploads the SME's requests for potential business partners and/or customers in a specific foreign market. The project partner in the proposed market then uses this information and arranges meetings with business partners and/or customers for the SME. The purpose of these meetings is to test whether or not the SME's product or services fits in the new market or if they should go back home and adapt new solutions to meet the market.

*Podio has become the central focal point of the network, since it integrates all project partners with all relevant information about the SMEs.*

*The platform has helped us work together across borders and identify new and sometimes unexpected opportunities for the SMEs.*

Jimmy Faustin Andersen  
Erhvervshus Sjælland  
Lean Landing Project Manager

Using Podio, the project partners have been able to communicate with each other on a daily basis and share relevant knowledge about the participating SMEs in their search for potential business partners and/or customers in the North Sea Region.

It is therefore recommended that when doing a cross border project, having an online platform to share vital information is a must. It is also important to emphasize that it is not enough just to communicate online. The interpersonal relationship between partners is often the basis for succeeding with the online communication. In Lean Landing it was at times more easy and convenient for the partners to call each other for information than using the online platform. But again this requires a close interpersonal relationship.



## Pre-qualification of the Micro SME's



In step 1, (see page 4), the micro SME's go through a workshop or meeting with their local Lean Landing partner to assess which market to focus on but also to find out if they fit into the Lean Landing project.

For Lean Landing the micro SME's should preferably, prior to joining the project, have had a 'proof of market validation' in the home market, meaning having established customers and sales, before looking towards new markets.

Furthermore, it was important that the micro SME's in Lean Landing had their focus on a single target market and not several markets at the same time. Quite a few companies were targeting several countries initially but had to choose a single country and market. The same market for the micro SME then was in focus when moving forward in steps 2, 3 and 4 (see page 4).

Concentrating on one specific export market at a time gives SMEs a chance of success in that market.

It is therefore recommended that if helping micro SMEs into new markets a pre-qualification is made to assess if their products or services are mature enough in their home before entering a new one. Furthermore it is suggested that focusing on one country at a time often ensures a more successful penetration of a foreign market abroad.

*The programme was incredibly well organized and a wonderful opportunity*

*Our local project partner was very professional and did a fantastic job. I felt very supported the entire time.*

### Testimonials from participating SMEs

*It was a great opportunity to explore new potential markets and meet up with potential collaborators.*

## Lead partner



Appointing a lead partner in a project with multiple partners in six different countries is something that is recommended. In the case of Lean Landing the lead partner – Erhvervshus Sjælland – had the overall responsibility for the project activities and project goals.

Having a responsible lead partner and a project manager was a necessity for Lean Landing. During the project period other partners would seek daily support and guidance from the Lead partner, especially when having difficulties reaching their own specific project goals in the project.

All the partners in Lean Landing were responsible for meeting individual project goals and objectives. The lead partner engaged with partners in a supportive and advisory role, which has been important for the success of the project and reaching the projects overall purpose.

Furthermore it is important to have a lead partner who is dedicated to facilitating and maintaining the communi-

cation and relationships between the partners.

A project lifetime can see a lot of change and partners in some cases leave or have new people come on board. It is therefore important that the lead partner is consistent. It is recommended that when implementing a similar soft-landing programme with partners abroad that there is a lead responsible partner for the overall initiative.

# Taking Lean Landing into the Future

Building a lasting soft-landing network was a central objective of the Lean Landing project, and it is an achievement to have done so.

The Lean Landing network will continue as an active soft-landing network after the end of the Lean Landing project. The voluntary cooperation between the project partners remains and the online platform Podio continues to function as a forum for exchanging leads and matching SMEs with potential business partners and/or customers in new markets.

The network will also be available to join for new business incubators, universities and business development organisations or accelerators within, and outside of, the North Sea Region.

For the future companies who will participate in Lean Landing there will be no reimbursement of travel costs and the companies will have to meet this cost themselves.

If interested in becoming a partner in Lean Landing, please contact Jimmy Faustin Andersen, from Erhvervshus Sjælland for more information.

*Jimmy Faustin Andersen*  
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Learn more about *Lean Landing* on [www.northsearegion.eu/lean-landing](http://www.northsearegion.eu/lean-landing)

Euronews  
<https://www.euronews.com/2018/11/30/how-the-lean-landing-project-is-helping-european-smes-to-go-international>

**Interreg**  
North Sea Region  
Lean Landing  
European Regional Development Fund



EUROPEAN UNION

# Lean Landing

Winner of the 2018 European Enterprise Promotion Awards

At the 2018 European Enterprise Promotion Awards, Lean Landing was awarded with the Grand Jury Price for being the most creative and inspiring entrepreneurial initiative in Europe.

The European Enterprise Promotion Awards is an initiative of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry Entrepreneurship and SMEs. It recognizes and rewards organisations or projects that promote entrepreneurship and small business at the national, regional and local level.



## European Enterprise Promotion Awards

*The jury considers Lean Landing to be highly innovative with an original approach through use of incubators across different countries.*

*The project demonstrates a high degree of participation and engagement for a wide range of stakeholders and has developed an innovative and lasting soft-landing network for micro SMEs in 6 countries.*

Kristin Schreiber  
Jury member and director for SME Policy  
and the COSME Programme DG GROW

*Lean Landing is truly a cross-border initiative and this award belongs to all of the 19 project partners who helped co-create the soft-landing network. They kept going when the project looked more like a plane crash than a soft-landing network and they proved that when you keep going, it will be worth the effort in the end. But this is not the end of Lean Landing – it's just the beginning.*

Mads Váczy Kragh  
CEO of ErhvervsShus Sjælland  
Lead Partner of Lean Landing